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ABSTRACT

Assessments of social competence have played a major role in the identification and treatment of youth with emotional disorders. This study examined the construct validity of the social skills subtest of the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS) when used with youth with emotional disorders. Comparisons were made to examine the convergent and discriminant validity of the social skills scale and to determine if the scale could distinguish between youth who were judged to be emotionally handicapped (EH) from youth judged to be non-emotionally handicapped (N-EH). The 99 subjects were predominantly male and Caucasian with an average standardized measure of intelligence of 85. Parents and teachers filled out their respective forms on the SSRS, in addition to other measurements, and their ratings served as the data for describing the subjects. Results suggest limited support for the convergent validity of the SSRS but not for the discriminant validity. All of the social skills scales completed by teachers distinguished between youth who were EH and N-EH. Only two of the social skills scales and none of the adaptive behavior scales completed by parents distinguished between the two groups. Teachers tended to view social competence and emotional competence as more closely related than did parents. Three tables and two figures summarize the study's data. (RJM)

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Social Skills of Youth with Serious Emotional Disturbances

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the construct validity of the social skills subtest of the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS; Gresham & Elliott, 1990) as well as to investigate whether this measure could distinguish between youth who are emotionally handicapped (EH) and non-emotionally handicapped (N-EH). The SSRS was compared to a measure of adaptive functioning and a measure of emotional/behavior problems.

The results suggest limited support for the convergent validity but not for the discriminate validity of the SSRS due to the method effect detected in ratings by parents and teachers. Further, all of the social skills scales completed by teachers distinguished between youth who were EH and N-EH. Only two of the social skills scales and none of the adaptive behavior scales completed by parents distinguished between the two groups. Teachers tended to view social competence and emotional competence as more closely related than did parents.

Social Skills of Youth with Serious Emotional Disturbances

Assessment of social competence has played a major role in the identification and treatment of youth with emotional disorders. Deficits in social competence have been demonstrated to be a risk factor for the development of behavior problems in children (Rea-Grant, Thomas, Offord, & Boyle, 1989) as well as occurring in children and adolescents identified as having emotional/behavior problems (Achenbach, 1991; Gresham & Elliott, 1990; Sparrow & Cicchetti, 1987). Factors associated with social competence include academic achievement, levels of participation and competence in activities, and the ability to relate easily to others. The assessment of social skills and adaptive behavior has also been associated with levels of social competence in children and adolescents.

Social competence is included in the theoretical models on the taxonomy of different areas that should be assessed for diagnosing exceptionalities in children and adolescents. In Greenspan's 1981 proposed taxonomy, personal competence or functioning is comprised of abilities in three different areas: intellectual competence (e.g., abstract, practical, and social intelligence); physical competence; and emotional competence. In this model, social competence is not a separate component, but rather an attribute that is a combination of social intelligence and emotional competence. Gresham and his associates (Gresham & Elliott, 1987; Gresham & Reschly, 1987) developed a modified version of Greenspan's model retaining the dimensions of physical and emotional competence and replacing the three elements of intellectual competence with a single component of cognitive competence. Rather than a combination of factors as in Greenspan's model, social competence is elevated and is a separate competence. Furthermore, social competence is seen as including the factors of adaptive behavior and social skills.

In the multiaxial empirically-based assessment model developed by McConaughy & Achenbach (1988; McConaughy, 1993), ratings of behavior problems are assessed through multiple informants, e.g., parent, teacher, and the child. Along with the ratings of behavior problems, competence in social interaction and activities as well as school achievement is assessed by the parent and the child, while a teacher assesses school performance and adaptive functioning.

The importance of adaptive behaviors of children with emotional disorders was found in two studies conducted by Sparrow and Cicchetti (1987). In both studies, children with emotional disorders were significantly lower in the socialization domain on the Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales (Sparrow, Balla, & Cicchetti, 1984) when compared to normal children. The authors concluded that the severity of adaptive behavior deficits increased with the severity of the psychological disturbances and that children with emotional disorders manifest their greatest deficits in socialization and maladaptive areas of functioning.

In an attempt to measure the relationship between various components of social competence, Gresham and Reschly (1987) assessed a sample of elementary school age students, half of whom were mildly handicapped, on measures of adaptive behavior, social

skills, and sociometric status. The sources of the ratings were manipulated with the adaptive behavior instrument completed by a parent and child, while the social skills instrument was completed by a teacher and a parent. The results revealed that the source used was clearly the most important factor in the assessment of social competence. The results also suggest that the method, setting, and content of adaptive and social skills assessment instruments greatly influence the type of information obtained.

In an informal and conceptual review of two adaptive behavior scales, Gresham and Elliott (1987) found that the scales had a substantial number of items that measured social behaviors. The authors conclude that the majority of the social behavior items contained within measures of adaptive behavior are important in the assessment of social skills. The authors maintain, however, that for a comprehensive understanding of a child's social skills, adaptive behavior measures must be supplemented with measures of social skills.

A validity study of the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS; Gresham & Elliott, 1990) explored the relationship between social skills behavior using the SSRS and emotional competence using the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1986). Using elementary age students, the correlation between the social skills scale of the SSRS and behavior problems were -.64, -.37, and -.33 using teachers, parents, and students ratings, respectively, with the negative correlations indicating that more social skills are associated with fewer behavior problems. The authors explain that the correlation of -.64 between the two scales completed by teachers indicate that the two scales measure opposite behaviors. They further explain that the moderate correlation of -.37 between parent ratings on the two scales indicate that "socially skilled behaviors and problem behaviors reported by parents are not at opposite ends of the single behavioral continuum. Rather, social skills and behavior problems are related constructs sharing a moderate degree of variance with the social behavior domain. "We believe that the primary reason for the moderate correlations ... is that some children exhibit socially skilled behaviors as well as problem behaviors" (Gresham & Elliott, 1990, p. 117).

Despite the empirical and theoretical literature on adaptive behavior, social skills behavior, and emotional competence, a lack of c arity exists in understanding the relationship among these three constructs. In their review of the empirical and analytic research relating psychological disturbances (e.g., emotional competence) to deficits in adaptive behavior, Sparrow and Cicchetti (1987) report "a paucity of relevant research" (p. 90).

The purpose of the present study was to examine the construct validity of the social skills subtest of the SSRS when used with youth with emotional disorders. To explore the construct validity of the social skills subtest of the SSRS, it was compared to a measure of adaptive behavior and a measure of behavior problems. Comparisons were made to examine the convergent and discriminant validity of the social skills scale and to determine if the scale could distinguish between youth who were judged to be emotionally handicapped from youth judged to be non-emotionally handicapped.

The social skills subtest of the SSRS was compared to the Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales (Vineland) Interview Edition Survey Form (Sparrow, Balla & Cicchetti, 1984) and two measures of emotional/behavior problems: the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983) and the Teachers Rating Form (TRF) of the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1986). Ratings on the SSRS parent and teacher form were compared for youth judged to be emotionally handicapped (EH) and non-emotionally handicapped (N-EH) based on the scores received on the CBCL and TRF.

METHOD

Subjects The 99 subjects in this study were a subset of youth who, along with their parents and teachers, were participating in the National Adolescent and Child Treatment Study (NACTS; Silver, Duchnowski, Kutash, Friedman, Eisen, Prange, Brandenburg & Greenbaum, 1992). NACTS, a seven year longitudinal study of youth with serious emotional disorders, has the objective of describing these youth and their long term outcomes. The subjects were initially identified from public mental health and educational systems. At the onset of NACTS, approximately half of the adolescents were enrolled in public school-based programs in accordance with Public Law 94-142. The remaining subjects were in mental health facilities supported at least in part by public funds. Participants were recruited from six states representing the four geographic regions of the country. The study gathered in-depth information on the youths' family characteristics, psychological functioning, services received, and outcomes over time.

The 99 subjects for this investigation were predominately male (78%) and Caucasian (71%) with an average standardized measure of intelligence of 85. At the onset of NACTS or three years before collection of the current data, 47% received treatment in a residential facility as compared to 53% who received services in a public school special education program for youth with emotional disturbances. The majority of the subjects (65%) at the time of the current data collection were living in the community with parent(s) or relatives.

Measures Parents completed the SSRS parent form (SSRS-P) and the CBCL, while teachers completed the SSRS teacher form (SSRS-T) and TRF for the 99 youth. In addition, parents completed the Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales, Interview Addition, Survey Form (Sparrow, Balla & Cicchetti, 1984).

Social Skills Ratings System (SSRS; Gresham & Elliott, 1990). The parent version of this scale contains 40 prosocial skills, while the teacher version contains 30 prosocial items. The parent version contains 10 items that make up the Responsibility subscale not contained in the teacher version. Of the remaining 30 items, there is a 50 percent overlap in items between the parent and teacher versions. The prosocial items are rated on two dimensions: Frequency (2 = very often, 1 = sometimes and 0 = never) and Importance (2 = critical for success, 1 = important, and 0 = unimportant). Teachers are asked to rate the importance of behaviors for classroom success, while parents are asked to rate the importance of the behaviors for their child's overall development. The SSRS was standardized in 1988 on a

national sample of 4,170 students rating themselves, 259 teachers rating 1,335 students, and 922 parents rating their children.

Ratings of secondary grade level students found high internal reliability on both the parent and teacher version of this scale (coefficient alpha of .90 and .93, respectively). Stability of the social skills ratings for both versions are high as shown in the high test-retest reliability when the scales were given twice with a 4 week delay between administrations (.87 and .85, respectively). The authors also reported adequate construct validity of the SSRS-P and SSRS-T social skills subtest as it correlates positively with similar constructs such as the CBCL Social Competence Total Scale (.58), and the Harter Teacher Rating Scale (.70).

Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales, Interview Edition, Survey Form (Vineland). The Vineland is a standardized semi-structured questionnaire of adaptive behavior in three domains: daily living skills, communications skills, and socialization skills. It contains 297 items administered by a trained interviewer to a parent or caregiver of a person from birth to 18 years 11 months of age or a low functioning adult. The Vineland demonstrates adequate reliability and validity and is discussed in more detail by Sparrow, Balla and Cicchetti (1984).

The Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983) and the Child Behavior Checklist Teacher's Report Form (TRF; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1987). The CBCL and TRF are standardized rating scales designed to obtain parents' and teachers' reports of a child's behavior problems. For the CBCL, parents rate the child on 118 problem items, using a 0-1-2 scale for how true the items is for the child now and within the past six months. The TRF is designed to parallel the CBCL. Teacher's rate the child on 118 items derived directly from the CBCL, with 25 items modified to be applicable for teacher ratings. The reliability, validity, and normative standardization of the CBCL and TRF have been discussed in detail by Achenbach and Edelbrock (1983) and Achenbach and Edelbrock (1986).

Procedure The social skills subtest of the SSRS parent form (SSRS-P), CBCL, and Vineland were read to the parents' of the subjects over the phone by trained interviewers. Mothers were the respondent of choice for the phone interview. Teachers of the subjects were mailed the TRF and SSRS teacher form (SSRS-T) to be completed and returned to the University. Data from 99 dyads of parents' and teachers' ratings served as the data for describing the subjects in this study.

RESULTS

To examine the convergent and discriminant validity of the SSRS, the standard scores from the SSRS-P, SSRS-T, CBCL, TRF and Vineland were correlated and placed in a modified multitrait, multimethod (MTMM) matrix for analysis. This matrix contains

convergent validity coefficients, that is, correlations between the same construct measured by different methods or sources, see Figure 1. In order to establish convergent validity, according to the criteria outlined by Campbell and Fiske (1959), the convergent validity coefficients should be significantly different from zero and large enough to encourage further investigation of the matrix. In this investigation, the convergent validity coefficient was .20 ($p < .05$) between the two forms of the social skills scale. While the correlation coefficient is significantly different from zero, it is not large and therefore, the review of the MTMM matrix offers only modest support for the convergent validity of the social skills subtest of the SSRS.

Insert Figure 1 about here

In order to support discriminant validity, the convergent coefficients should be larger than correlations between other traits, each measured by different methods (values in the heterotrait-heteromethod triangle in the MTMM matrix) as well as larger than the correlations of other traits measured by the same method (values contained within the heterotrait-monomethod triangle in the MTMM matrix). In this matrix, none of the heterotrait-heteromethod coefficients were significantly different from the convergent validity coefficient between the two forms of the SSRS. While the heterotrait-heteromethod coefficients were significantly different from the convergent validity coefficient, they were larger, not smaller, as needed for support of evidence for discriminant validity for the SSRS (see Table 1). Therefore, discriminant validity was not found for the social skills scale of the SSRS in the results of this MTMM analysis. The results did point to a strong method effect operating with the ratings. That is, the source of the ratings, from either parents or teachers, appears to significantly effect the correlation between the instruments.

Insert Table 1 about here

To further investigate the convergent and discriminant validity of the SSRS, given the strong method effect operating within the ratings, a factor analysis of the subscales of the SSRS-P, SSRS-T, CBCL, TRF, and Vineland was conducted to determine the underlying structure and relationship between the instruments. The factor analysis, using a principal axis extraction technique, revealed a three-factor solution as shown in Table 2. Two factors were comprised of parents' ratings while a third factor contained teachers' ratings. Of the two factors that were based on ratings completed by parents, one factor was comprised of ratings on adaptive and social skills behavior and one factor was comprised of ratings of emotional/behavior problems. These results indicate that the Vineland and SSRS-P are measuring constructs that are distinct from that being measured by the CBCL. Teachers' ratings of social skills behavior using the SSRS-T and emotional/behavior problems using the TRF were not found to be separate constructs as they loaded onto the same factor.

Insert Table 2 about here

To further investigate the social skills subscale of the SSRS, an investigation was conducted to determine if it could differentiate between subjects judged to be emotionally handicapped (EH) and non-emotionally handicapped (N-EH). Subjects who were in the clinical range on both the CBCL and TRF were considered EH, while subjects not in the clinical range on both the CBCL and TRF were considered N-EH. Scores on the SSRS-P and SSRS-T as well as parent ratings on the Vineland were compared for these two groups of subjects using a one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) and univariate analyses of variance (ANOVA). As shown in Table 3, these analyses indicated that teachers' ratings on all social skills behaviors of EH youth were significantly lower than for N-EH youth. No significant differences were found for parents' ratings on the Vineland between EH and N-EH youth. Only two of the SSRS-P social skills were found to be significantly different between EH and N-EH youth- the self-control and responsibility scale. The responsibility scale is found on the parent version of the SSRS but not on the teacher version.

Insert Table 3 & Figure 2 about here

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the construct validity of the social skills subtest of the SSRS. This investigation examined the SSRS by comparing it to scales measuring emotional/behavior problems and adaptive behavior in children and adolescents. The correlation between the parent and teacher forms of this scale suggest only limited convergent validity. While small, the convergent validity coefficient of .20 between the teacher and parent forms of the SSRS is similar to the results obtained by Achenbach, McConaughy, & Howell (1987) revealing an average correlation of .28 between parents and teachers in a meta-analysis of 119 studies.

Several reasons have been put forth for the lack of agreement between parents and teachers in their ratings of children. The foremost reason for the discrepancy is that children's functioning can vary from one context or environment to another. For example, children and adolescents may behave differently at school than at home. Ratings may also differ by the role the rater plays in the life of the child. Achenbach, et al. (1987) found mean correlations of .60 between adults who served similar functions to the child (e.g., between two teachers, between two parents). How deviant behavior is perceived and tolerated by different adult observers is also an issue (Hundert, Cassie & Johnston, 1988) and finally, the measurement of a construct naturally contains some error and is not a perfect

measures. Given that teachers are rating classroom behaviors on the SSRS, parents are rating overall social behavior and there is only a 50 percent overlap between items on the forms, the small, yet statistically significant correlation between forms suggest some convergence on the construct of social skills.

No evidence for discriminant validity was found for the social skills scale within the MTMM analysis. That is, ratings performed between adults of similar roles were always higher than ratings across adults of different roles, even when using the same scale. This suggests that a strong method effect was operating and that "who" is completing the rating is more important than "what" they were rating.

A further investigation of the method effect was conducted through a factor analysis of the ratings. These results indicate that for parents' ratings, the Vineland and SSRS are measuring constructs that are distinct from those being measured by the CBCL. Teachers' ratings on the SSRS and TRF were found not to be separate constructs.

The examination of whether the SSRS could distinguish between youth with EH and N-EH revealed that teachers' ratings of social skills behavior of EH youth were significantly lower than for N-EH youth. No significant differences were found for parents' ratings on the Vineland and only two scales on the SSRS differed between EH and N-EH youth when rated by parents. This supports the idea that deficits in social competence and emotional problems are very similar constructs for teachers but not for parents. This finding has direct implications for service delivery. While teachers may see the need for social skills training for youth with emotional disorders, parents may not hold the same perception. Given these different perceptions, parents may wonder why social skills training is being delivered rather than services directly related to the mental health needs of their child.

This research supports the use of multiple raters when assessing children and adolescents with emotional disorders. It has become clear that a single informant cannot adequately describe the complex behavior of youth. However, the use of multiple raters often provides a more complex picture of a child than a single informant. The relationship between constructs and attributes provided by multiple informants is the current challenge in assessing and providing services for children and adolescents with emotional disorders.

The results of this study point to the limited support that the teacher and parent forms of the SSRS are measuring the construct of social skills or social competence. More importantly, this research points to relationships between the construct of social competence and emotional competence. Teachers tend to rate youth with emotional disorders as having greater deficits in social skills and see the two constructs of social competence and emotional competence as more closely related than do parents. While based on a limited number of subjects, these results are beginning to shed some light on how parents' and teachers' ratings differ across constructs.

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Table 1

Results of the two-tailed dependent t tests between the convergent validity coefficient and the heterotrait-heteromethod coefficients and heterotrait-monomethod coefficients (N=99).

Social Skills	r:	t Value:
Convergent Validity Coefficient:	.20	
Heterotrait-heteromethod coefficients:		
Social Skills (p) and TRF(t)	.12	.88
Social Skills (t) and Vineland (p)	.23	.36
Social Skills (t) and CBCL(p)	.20	.00
Heterotrait-monomethod coefficients:		
Social Skills (p) and CBCL (p)	.57	3.51**
Social Skills (p) and Vineland (p)	.64	4.53***
Social Skills (t) and TRF (t)	.59	3.61**

Emotional/Behavior Problems	r:	t Value:
Convergent Validity Coefficient:	.35	
Heterotrait-heteromethod coefficients:		
TRF (t) and Vineland (p)	.25	.94
TRF (t) and Social Skills (p)	.12	2.61*
CBCL (p) and Social Skills (t)	.20	1.73
Heterotrait-monomethod coefficients:		
TRF (t) and Social Skills (t)	.59	2.41*
CBCL (p) and Vineland (p)	.37	.18
Social Skills (p) and CBCL (p)	.57	2.09*

*** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

Table 2
Pattern Matrix and Related Statistics from the Rotated Factor Solution

Subscales:	Factor: 1	2	3
Vineland (**Parent**)			
Socialization	.800|	-.129	-.074
Daily Living Skills	.777|	-.088	.033
Communication	.677|	-.057	.193
Social Skills (**Parent**)			
Responsibility	.650|	.064	-.378
Assertion	.624|	.126	-.083
Cooperation	.501|	-.038	-.226
Self-Control	.414	-.021	-.496|
CBCL (**Parent**)			
Externalizing	.004	.184	.916|
Internalizing	.022	.002	.725|
Social Skills (**Teacher**)			
Assertion	.176	-.501|	.050
Cooperation	.019	-.818|	.055
Self-Control	-.230	-.903|	-.034
TRF (**Teacher**)			
Externalizing	.025	.751|	.086
Internalizing	-.125	.366|	.102
Eigenvalue	4.83	2.02	1.09
Percent of Variance	34.50	14.40	7.80
Intercorrelations	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Factor 1	1		
Factor 2	.21	1	
Factor 3	-.47	-.29	1

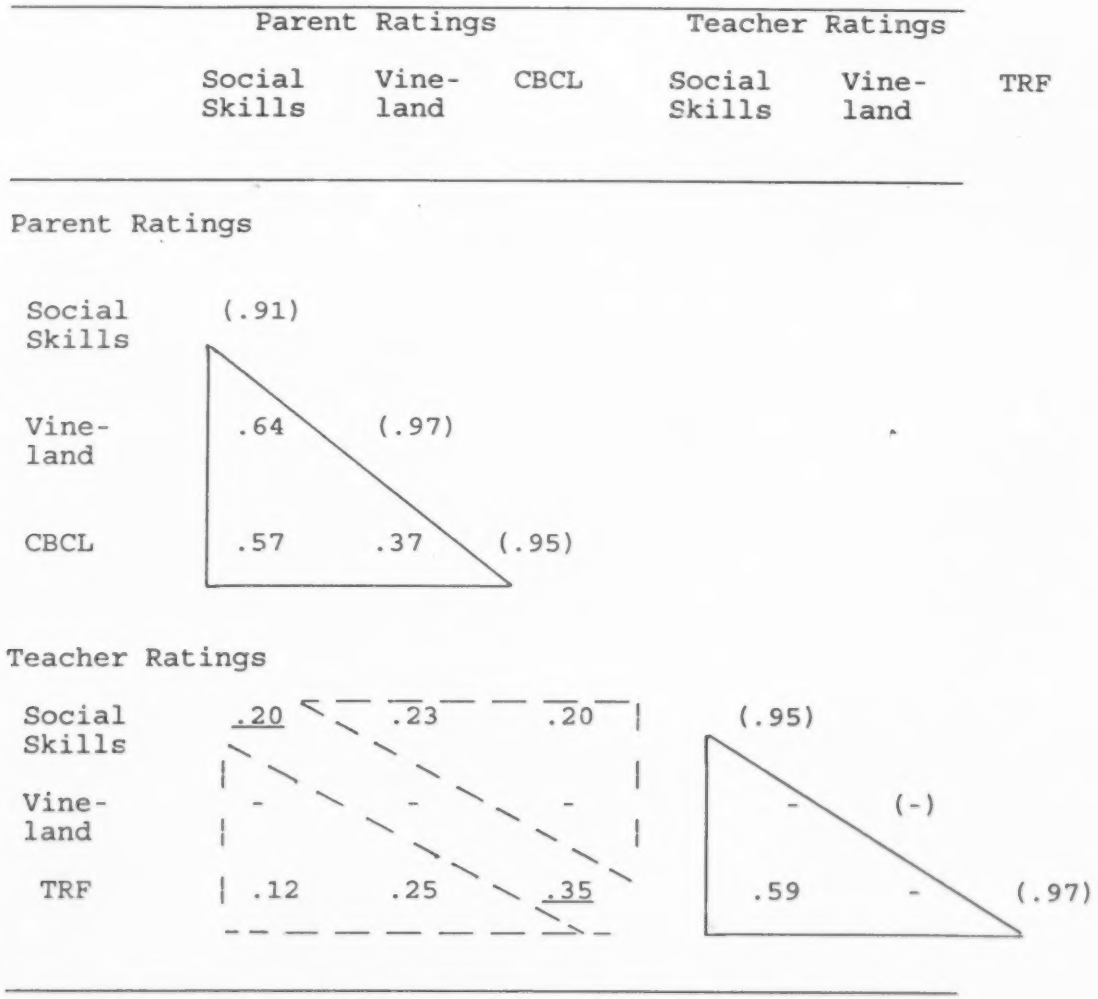
Table 3

Analyses of Variance (ANOVA) Results Between EH and N-EH Youth Based on Total Scores on the CBCL AND TRF by Social Skills and Adaptive Behavior Subscale Ratings.

Scale	EH Mean (N=56)	N-EH Mean (N=12)	F
Social Skills- Teacher			
Total	74.57	97.32	26.19***
Cooperation	8.89	15.83	28.85***
Assertion	7.16	10.42	6.12*
Self-Control	6.80	12.92	32.00***
Social Skills- Parent			
Total	83.04	90.17	2.51
Cooperation	10.13	11.83	1.73
Assertion	10.38	10.17	.03
Self-Control	8.63	11.50	6.53*
Responsibility	12.48	14.50	4.21***
Vineland Composite- Parent			
Composite	62.79	70.00	1.72
Communication	65.55	70.17	.52
Daily Living	72.41	78.67	.95
Socialization	63.71	74.92	3.09
Age	15.87	16.51	.93
IQ	85.27	85.00	.00
CBCL	74.14	52.33	
TRF	75.25	57.25	

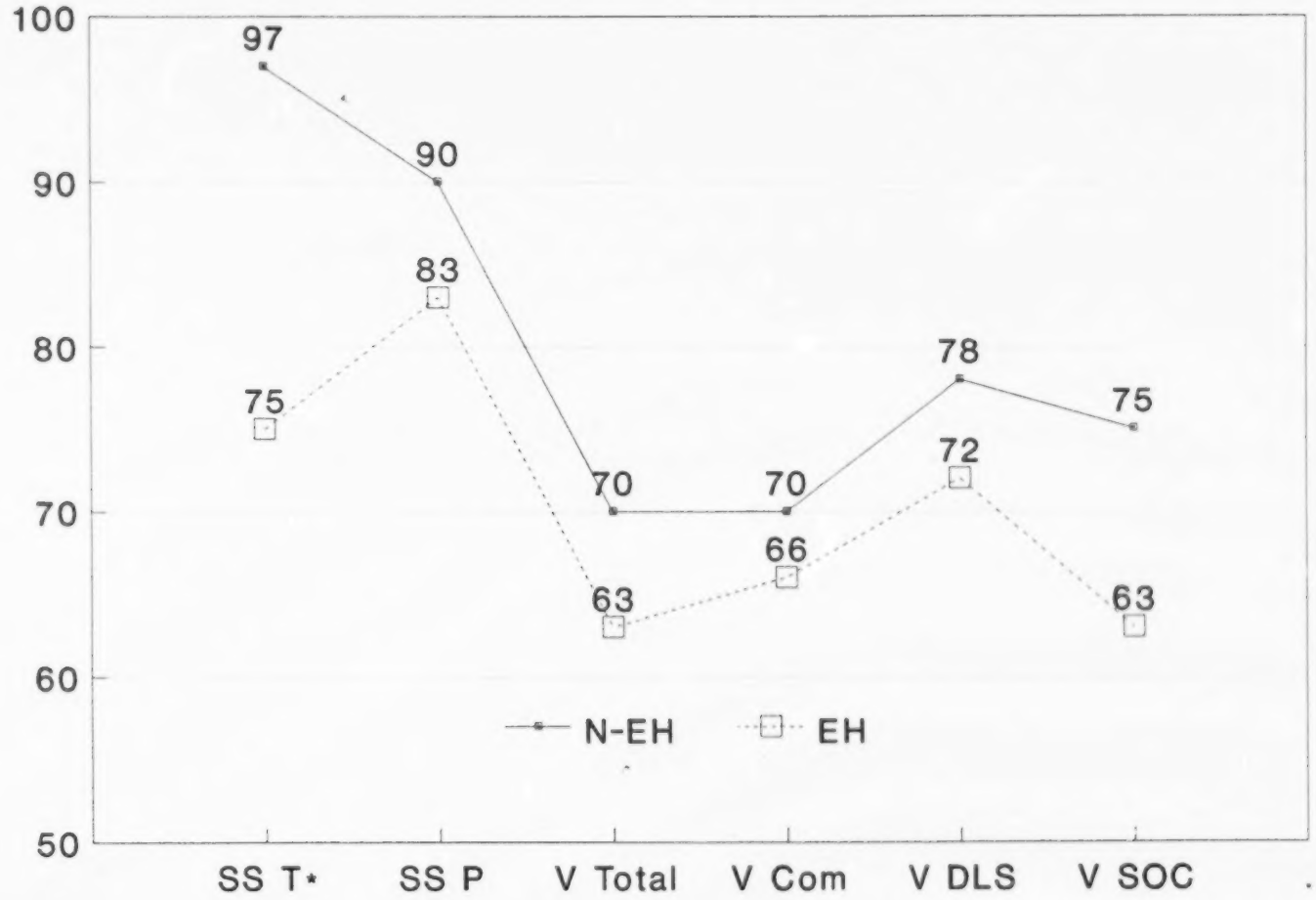
*** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

Figure 1. ***Multitrait multimethod correlation matrix of total scores (N=99).***



Note: The validity diagonal is formed by the values which are underlined. The reliability diagonal is formed by the values in parentheses which were calculated using Cronbach's alpha. The heterotrait-monomethod values are enclosed by solid lines, while the heterotrait-heteromethod values are enclosed by broken lines.

Figure 2. EH & NEH by Social Skills and Adaptive Behavior Subscales Ratings



* indicates p < .05